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SUBJECT: NEW COR MEMBER FOCUSES ON ROLE OF SPORTS IN UNIFYING IRAQ, CONCERNED ABOUT TAWAFUQ AND IRAN

Classified By: Acting Political Counselor Ellen Germain for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) The newest member of the Council of Representatives (CoR), Ahmed Rathi (IIP/Tawafuq), was installed by the Tawafuq bloc after one of its own, Abdul Nasir al-Janabi (Sunni, National Dialogue Conference) bolted from the CoR, saying he was leaving to "join the insurgency." Rathi, a popular and well-known soccer player, shared with PolOffs on October 22 his hopes and plans for his new job, which include joining the CoR Committee on Youth and Sports in order to improve relations with the Ministry of Youth and Sports and Iraq's Olympic Committee. He believes sports is an effective vehicle for breaking through sectarian barriers and is a unifying force in Iraq. He complained that only Shia regions are receiving governmental assistance with sports - an imbalance he seeks to redress. He believes Tawafuq's withdraw has reduced the bloc's power, and worries about Iranian influence in the country. End summary.

AHMED RATHI REPLACES RESIGNED COR MEMBER

¶2. (C) Ahmed Rathi (IIP/Tawafuq) recently replaced Abdul Nasir al-Janabi (National Dialogue Conference) in the CoR, and was sworn in on October 8. In early October, Janabi announced his resignation from the CoR in order to join the insurgency. The CoR subsequently voted for approval of his resignation on October 3, with loss of financial and other privileges. (Note: Speaker Mahmoud Mashadani, who is from the same party as Janabi, reportedly opposed the replacement of Ahmed Rathi in Janabi's position since Rathi is with the Iraq Islamic Party (IIP) of the Tawafuq bloc. However, Mashadani was out of the country during the CoR discussions on this issue. End note).

¶3. (C) Ahmed Rathi is a famous soccer player, known throughout Iraq by sports fans. He told PolOffs there is too much sectarianism in the CoR. He made a previous unsuccessful bid to join the CoR on an IIP list, and up to now has been resident with his family in Jordan. He added that he expects to join the CoR Committee on Youth and Sports as part of his responsibilities, but noted there must be a CoR vote on the issue. He would like to improve relations between the Ministry of Youth and Sports and the CoR's committee during his tenure. He raised the kidnapping of Ahmed al-Samarri, the Head of the Iraqi Olympic Committee in July 2006 as an example of the extent of sectarian problems in Iraq.

COR COMMITTEE/MINISTRY RELATIONSHIP

¶4. (C) Rathi said there is a tenuous relationship between the Ministry of Youth and Sports and CoR Committee that he believes can be improved. The current Minister of Youth and Sports, Jasim Muhammad Jafar (UIA-Shia) is reportedly not very experienced in the sports field and relies on Basil Abd

al-Mahdi, his senior advisor, on many issues. (Note: Basil is VP Adil Abd al-Mahdi's brother. Jasim was also the former Minister of Housing and Construction in the Iraqi Transitional Government (ITG). End note). Rathi claims there are no Sunnis at the ministry (sic). If he is voted by the other CoR members to join the committee, he would like to help influence funding of the ministry's budget, which is approximately \$35 million.

YOUTH AND SPORTS CAN UNIFY IRAQ

¶ 15. (C) Regarding the current political situation in Iraq, Rathi said "there is not much to be hopeful." He said he wants to see cooperation between Sunnis and Shias in the CoR and GOI. He believes sports can be a uniting force. Rathi's priorities for his work include legislation and influencing the budget to increase the number of stadiums and sports clubs in the provinces. He added that "providing youth with opportunities in sports is a way to keep them from joining the insurgency." (Note: There are reportedly 300 sports clubs in Iraq, all publicly funded given the lack of a private sector in Iraq. End note).

TAWAFUQ WITHDRAW, IRAN, ANBAR SHEIKHS

¶ 16. (C) On the Tawafuq withdrawal from the GOI, Rathi offered he does not completely agree with this decision. He said the Sunnis right now are outside the decisionmaking process and VP Hashimi and others Tawafuq senior members are losing their power. He said, "it is better for the Sunnis to participate and work towards a solution, which is a better position from which to deal with the Maliki government." However, when

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asked who from the Sunni side could lead such an effort, he responded "there are no new people."

¶ 17. (C) Rathi is also very concerned about the overwhelming influence of Iran in Iraq. He said "there needs to be more balance." He added that Iran is creating problems for both Shia and Sunnis and influencing the government too much. Regarding the Anbar Awakening Council, he does not think Sheikh Ahmed Abu Risha or others will be able to extend their influence beyond the Anbar province.

BIO NOTE

¶ 18. (C) Ahmed Rathi's family is originally from Basrah, but he was born in Baghdad and attended the University of Baghdad. He spent the last two and half years in Jordan, and his wife and three daughters remain there due to the security situation. He is a famous soccer player known throughout Iraq. He played soccer most of his life, but left Baghdad in ¶ 2004. He speaks some functional English, but prefers to speak in Arabic. He is well-educated and comes across as a moderate IIP/Tawafuq member.

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